

Transformations of Meanings of Myths in the Srabad Banteng-Windu Reverse Glass Paintings in Cirebon, Indonesia

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Received	Accepted	Published
20.06.2026	27.09.2026	30.09.2026

<https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej.2026.13.05.06>

Abstract

Srabad painting is a glass painting made in Cirebon, Indonesia with a pictographic calligraphy theme based on the symbol of Sufism. They show the acculturation of various cultures and people who have visited or lived in this city, such as Hindus, Buddhists, Islamic, Chinese, Indians, Arabs and the Europeans. This research examines the transformation of the meaning of myths in the reverse glass painting of *Srabad Banteng-Windu* in Cirebon, Indonesia.

It employs an interpretive descriptive method with an ethnographic approach to understand the cultural concepts of the Cirebon people through the analysis of Banteng-Windu images on *Srabad* glass paintings. The research began with a literature study related to the art of reversed glass paintings in general and especially in Indonesia. This information was supplemented with interview data from informants such as traditional Cirebon glass painting artists, cultural figures, as well as members of the Cirebon Palace and the community leaders. Secondary data sources were obtained from the ancient manuscript literature and the *Srabad Tarekat Sattariyah* Cirebon manuscript, as well as research journals through library studies. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory was used to analyse the signs and myths, complemented by the paradox aesthetic theory.

The results show that there is a transformation in the meaning of the mythical sign in the *Banteng-Windu* figure which aims to convey Islamic ideology (tawhid). The *Mahesasura-Jatasura* myth is used to make the Cirebonese people's understanding of Islamic Lessons accepted and understood easier, because the narrative is not much different from what they are familiar with. In this way, they don't feel ripped off from their old traditions.

Keywords: Reverse Glass Painting, *Srabad*, Transformations, Myths, Cirebon, Indonesia.

Introduction

The art of reverse glass painting is well known as a unique art medium of the fine arts particularly practiced in Indonesia. The painting technique is complicated because it is done in reverse from the traditional painting model, producing a distinctive flatness effect due to specular reflections from the glass material on the reverse side. However, the complexity of this reverse painting method often causes a loss of details in the paintings (Armetta et al., 2023). Although this art came to Indonesia from Europe (Samuel, 2023), glass paintings have been originally developed in China. Then, they have been exported to Europe such as Sweden, England, France, Netherlands, and Germany and Russia (van der Poel, 2022; Audric, 2022). In fact, not only to Europe, Chinese glass painting have also entered Indonesia through European trade missions and the presence of ethnic Chinese who had settled in Indonesia at the end of the 19th century (Fischer, 1994; Samuel, 2005; Waluyo, 2006).

From many studies about the art of reverse glass painting in Indonesia, especially in Cirebon, West Java, only Casta's article (2022) mentions the existence of *Srabad* glass painting. There are some of Jérôme Samuel's articles regarding to reverse glass painting in Cirebon; one has the theme of the portrait of 'Chinese Women' (Samuel, 2022), exploring the role and position of Chinese theme painters of developing reverse glass paintings in Java and Bali in the ninth and twentieth centuries. Another article by Samuel (2023), briefly explains an example of a Cirebon glass painting depicting buildings and the holy city of Muslims (Haramain). This article generally explains the transformation of the depiction of Islamic sacred buildings in glass paintings, influenced by identical visual depictions from various countries.

Adding to this, Casta explains that *Srabad* glass painting is a calligraphy glass painting theme in Cirebon which has existed originally in the form of pictograph calligraphy based on the *petarekat* symbol. *Srabad* has several types based on the depiction of figures in the paintings, including *Srabad Macan Ali*, *Banteng Windu*, *Sayidina Ali*, *Ganesa*, *Insan Kamil*, and others. These *Srabad* glass paintings (calligraphy pictographs) are categorized as doxa glass paintings of the Cirebon Palace, including glass paintings with shadow puppet themes and images of mosques from the Islamic cultural treasures (Casta et al., 2021).

In this context, this research examines the transformations of the meanings of the mythical figure in the visuals of the *Srabad Banteng-Windu* painting, due to acculturation of Indonesian culture in the past. Indeed, this is one of the unique things about the art of inverted glass paintings from Cirebon. In fact, the research examines the transformation of the meaning of absorbed cultural myths in *Srabad* glass painting, especially in relation to the ideology of the Cirebon kingdom, Islam. The research identifies the uniqueness of the *Srabad* reversed glass painting art from Cirebon, Indonesia, which differentiates it from reversed glass paintings from other regions and countries. Its aim however is to present the ways in which myths related to glass paintings in Indonesia have transformation their meanings. Its objectives are as follows.

1. To identify the myths related to glass paintings in the Cirebon kingdom in Indonesia
2. To identify their transformations.

Theoretical Framework

Etymologically, 'transformation' according to the Webster Dictionary (1970) means 'change into something'. According to linguistics, 'transformation' means changing a grammatical structure into another grammatical structure by adding, subtracting or rearranging its elements (Sachari and Sunarya, 2001: 8). Adhi Nugraha in the book 'Transformations of Traditions (2012) reveals the meaning of transformation (transformism) as an act that "deals with the terms such as sustaining, reviving, revitalizing, restoring, and transforming". Transformations contain the spirit of continuous change, reviving, and changing a thing to suit current real-world conditions. This philosophically departs from the fact that in the real world nothing is stable, or stagnant. Everything is always moving, changing and connected to everything else (Nugraha, 2012). Based on the definition above, the term transformation can be understood as a change in form, either in whole or in part, by adding, subtracting or reconstructing the elements that make it up.

The definition of *Srabad* is explained in several studies as an image or visual in Arabic combined with a figure as a frame, including Hindu mythological animals such as Ganesha, which is an elephant. Initially, *Srabad* was a means of spreading the Islamic religion. This can be seen from the use of Arabic taken from verses of the Koran (Meirina et al., 2019). A comprehensive explanation of the meaning of *Srabad* can be found in Arif Yunanto's thesis (2019) entitled "Axiology of Cirebon *Srabad* Glass Paintings: Relevance to Character Education." It explains that *Srabad* is known generally as an image of a creature or object formed with Arabic calligraphy (Anthropomorphic calligraphy). Interviews with Opan Safari Dr. Rafan S. Hasyim and Natsir show that *Srabad* is a form of acculturation of Hindu and Islamic cultures, because some depictions of *Srabad* are in the form of Hindu mythological animals, which are modified by Islamic understanding and beliefs (syncretism). They contain calligraphy art depicting mustajabah prayers.

Determining and arranging visual objects is the artist's effort (creativity) and taste. The use of the word "taste" in this instance can be assumed to be the artist's ideology and beliefs with the aim of spreading the message of Islam as well as a form of worship for those who believe in it.

These theoretical ideas are central to understanding the issue of the transformations of myths in the reverse glass paintings of Cirebon, Indonesia. The definitions provided offer clarity and deep insights into the nuances of their meanings and thus enable the interpretation of the research material and data.

Research Methods

This research employs primarily a case study as a research method. It uses an interpretive descriptive research method using visual analysis through an ethnographic approach. Generally, ethnographic research focuses its attention on a society not only geographical, but also socio-cultural actions such as work, beliefs, lifestyle, and so on (Emzir, 2013: 143). Referring to Spradley (in Saidi, 2017: 180) ethnography is not just a research that studies a society, but also learns from that society. Thus, the results of ethnographic research can be said to be information about the society being studied. In this case, it is how the cultural concept of the Cirebon people as reflected in the analysis of the *Srabad* art of glass painting arises. The cultural context in ethnography is substantial because individuals will present the cultural views of a community group in data or fact findings. The main strategy of ethnographic research is to explain the cultural context with the aim of understanding other people's lifestyles from their perspective (Wahyuni et al., 2023).

The initial step of the research study was to conduct a literature survey to see the novelty of the research among other similar studies, especially those related to the art of inverted glass painting in Indonesia and especially in Cirebon. Adding to this information. Interviews were also conducted. However, due to limited sources of explanations regarding the meaning of *Srabad*, in-depth interviews were conducted with only several informants. These included the following individuals.

- Dr. Raffan Safari Hasyim, researcher, humanist and reverse glass painting artist in Cirebon;
- Kusdono Rastika, an inverted glass painting artist from the Cirebon tradition from Gegesik;
- Elang Muhammad Hilman, a member of the Cirebon kingdom and a murshid from the Cirebon Sattariyah-Muhammadiyah order;
- Dr. Casta, Cirebon researcher and cultural observer.

To add to this data, observations were made on the *Srabad* glass paintings at the Kacirebonan Palace, among the works created by Kusdono Rastika. Observations also found the ancient manuscripts related to the meaning of *Srabad* and the cultural history of Cirebon.

The next step is the process of visual analysis of the *Banteng-Windu* figure in particular to understand its meaning, through the matrix analysis method with Roland Barthes' structural semiotic approach. To complete the analysis, Jakob Soemardjo's Aesthetic Paradox theory approach was used. Finally, it arrives at the conclusions based on all the data.

The Case Study: The Srabad Banteng Windu Painting

This research is carried out in the Cirebon region, which is on the coast of the Java Sea. It is very open to the presence of foreign nations through trade and activities such as marriages which lead to cultural acculturation (Widayat & Prameswari, 2022; Schiffer et al., 2022; Hoadley, 1988). Muarajati Port, Cirebon, is one of the ports on the Indonesian Silk Road, thought to be the gateway to the presence of glass painting in Cirebon. As an international trade port, it has resulted in the meeting of various cultural visual traditions from other nations, such as *wadasan* ornaments from China, Arabic calligraphy, Hindu-Buddhist myths from India, and glass paintings from China and Europe (Waluyo, 2006). It is estimated that glass painting entered Indonesia at the beginning of the 19th century and experienced peak development in the 1930-1950s (Casta, 2018: 70; Samuel, 2022). Based on this hypothesis, it shows that the oldest glass paintings in Cirebon are the *Insan Kamil* and *Gunungan* glass paintings which have a reproduction date of 1883 AD/1371 Hijriah (Fathurrohman, 2002). It is noteworthy that Cirebon, as an Islamic kingdom founded by Sunan Gunung Jati, has carried out cultural adaptations and reinterpreted various elements of external culture (acculturation) in accordance with Islamic ideology (tauhid).

In terms of the reverse glass paintings in Cirebon, a sample of the *Srabad* glass painting with the title *Banteng Windu* by Kusdono Rastika, a traditional glass painting artist from Gegesik village, Cirebon Regency, was taken (ivaa-online.org, 2023). This is thus a case study. The *Srabad Banteng Windu* painting is a painting object that has been made for generations by Kusdono, based on works made by his father Rastika, a Cirebon glass painting maestro. An interview with Raffan Safari Hasyim reveals that the *Srabad Banteng Windu* painting was a sketch made by Mama Aruna, then developed by glass painters to become the work that exists today (2021). According to the visual description of the *Srabad Banteng Windu* painting by Kusdono, it shows the division of the painting into three main parts. At the bottom is a *Wadasan* ornament, which is a visual object of gradual accumulation of color (*larapan*) with rounded (blunt) characteristics resembling a pile of stones as a foothold for the figure above. In the middle, there is a figure of a mystical creature that is a combination of an elephant based on its trunk, and a bull based on the horns on its head and the shape of the creature's body. One of the unique things about this painting is the figure of the Bull-Elephant (*Banteng-Windu*) composed of hijaiyah letters in a free khat calligraphy style. Meanwhile, at the top, the *megamendung* ornament represents the upper world, in the form of a visual object consisting of a gradual pile of colors with some sharp edges.



Fig. 1: Srabad Banteng Windu Glass Painting by Kusdono Rastika in 2021

Source: Ilhamsyah, 2021

Finding & Discussion

As in the archipelago in general, artistic activities were originally a form of religious offerings and beliefs. As an example of cultural artifacts in the Cirebon area, the abstract patterns in the form of swastikas or diamonds, naturalistic shapes such as decorative trees of life, are the symbols that reflect pre-Islamic spiritual life. The various decorations in the form of clouds (*mega mendhung*) and coral rocks (*wadhasan*) have been brought by the Chinese traders originated from Taoism. Likewise, Hindu influence can be seen in the symbol of the Cirebon palace. The mystical White Tiger is a legacy of the Sundanese Hindu kingdom. The expansion of the Demak Kingdom has also influenced the development of Islam in Cirebon, including its art forms. For example, the art of puppetry, which is a Hindu culture, has been converted by the *Wali*, especially Sunan Kalijaga, to become Islamic in spirit and has become a medium for preaching at the beginning of the spread of Islam in Cirebon (Waluyo, 2006: 65).

In his writing titled "*Mitologi Lukisan Kaca Cirebon*", Raffan Syafari Hasyim, a Cirebon glass painting artist and philologist, (Hasyim, n.d.) divides Cirebon glass painting calligraphy into three types, namely: pictorial calligraphy including *Srabad* and wayang calligraphy; *Patarekatan* calligraphy; and Khat calligraphy. Hasyim differentiates *Srabad* calligraphy glass paintings from *Patarekatan* calligraphy. It is explained that *Srabad* is a glass painting to protect the owner of the painting from various dangers and illnesses, while *Patarekatan* paintings are forms of calligraphy which contain the teachings or *kaweruh-kaweruh* (knowledge) of *Tharekat* and *Awrod* which are studied (practiced) by *Tharekat* experts (congregation). There are very clear characteristics of the differences between the calligraphy art of *Srabad* and *Patarekatan* glass paintings, including in the *Srabad* paintings the use of Hindu-Buddhist mythological figures which are the influence of ancient Mataram and Pajajaran kingdoms. Meanwhile, in the *Patarekatan* glass paintings, it appears that the creator of the painting tried to avoid depicting living creatures, in accordance with the hadith and opinions of several scholars who forbid this.

Referring to the interviews with Hasyim (2021) and Pengeran Elang Muhammad Hilman from the Kacirebonan Palace (2021), *Srabad* is defined as "Mingser So Century" or can be interpreted as a shift from the *Kesanghyangan* (Hindu-Buddhist) era to the Islamic era. This understanding is a direct reference from Prince Teja Subrata, a member of the Kasepuhan Palace family. The results of Hasyim's discussion with the ulama regarding Prince Teja Subrata's explanation of *Srabad* has reached a consensus, accompanied by several references to his books, that *Srabad* was identical to *Richul Achmar* (red wind), and some were of the opinion that *Richul Achmar* was part of *Srabad*. *Richul Achmar* itself is a type of disease outbreak that is both dhohir and spiritual, and the prayer sentences offered to protect against this epidemic (prayer to reject reinforcements) are called the *Srabad* prayer.

This *Srabad* prayer can be found in many books that explain *Richul Achmar*, including "the Book of Dairobi or Mularobat Dirobil Khabir", written by Sheikh Achmad Dairobi (Hasyim, n.d.). Prince Elang Muhammad Hilman himself has a special book regarding *Srabad* prayers called the "White *Srabad* Book" which is a book left to be inherited from his family for generations.

One form of shift from the Hindu-Buddhist era to the Islamic era is the use of the Pegon language (Cirebon-Javanese-Arabic) with Arabic script, interspersed with the words *Laa Ilaaha Illallah* and *Muhammadur rossulullah*. Then the *Srabad* text has been made in the form of calligraphic writing which has been applied to various media, such as paper, wood carvings, canvas (in the form of paintings), and in its development it has also been applied to glass paintings (Hilman, 2021).

The interesting thing is the understanding of *Srabad* as a shift from the *Kesanghyangan* era to the Islamic era. The belief in the existence of spirits (*jinn*, *puntianak*, *wewe gundul*, *blegedek ireng* or *genderuwo*) is basically not in conflict with Islamic lessons in general (Muhaimin, 1996). The Sulendraningrat manuscript tells about the myth of the creation of the Javanese nation, especially the myth of the kinship relationship between Sunan Gunung Jati and the Prophet Adam.

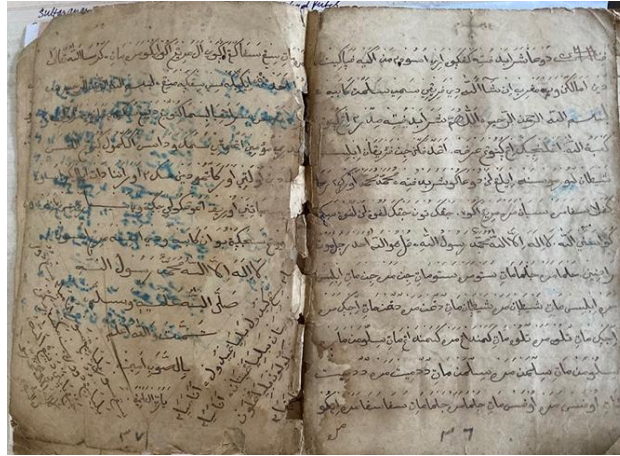


Fig. 2: *Srabad Putih* Manuscript Belonging to Elang Muhammad Hilman
Source: Ilhamsyah, 2021

It is believed that Sunan Gunung Jati's mother, Rara Santang, was a descendant of Syis, son of Adam through the line of his father Prabu Siliwangi, and the 25th descendant of Sang(H)yang Nurasa. Sang(H)yang Nurasa (Nur Cahaya) herself is the grandson of Idajil, the king of Jin who engineered the pregnancy of his daughter Delajah by resembling her form with Syis' wife, Dewi Mulat. Sang(H)yang Nurasa was the propagator of the Kesanghyangan religion in Java (Javanese religion), and it is believed that his descendants are the ancestors of the Javanese people to this day (Muhaimin, 2002: 83-88). Apart from the truth of the narrative above, the existence of Srabad, based on its understanding, shows that there was an attempt at dialogue between the propagators of Islam and religions that previously existed in Java. This can be clearly seen in the explanation of the Srabad Banteng Windu glass painting artifact below.

Previous research analysis reveals that the Windu Bull is the embodiment of the Hindu mythological figure Mahesasura-Jatasura. Referring to mythical stories in the Java region in general, this figure is a powerful figure who will not die if both of them do not die simultaneously. Because if one person is injured, the other figure will heal (Yunanto, 2019: 90-91). An interview with Kusdono Rastika revealed that the figure of Banteng Windu is another embodiment of the figure of Ganesha in the Cirebonan shadow puppet mountains. Kusdono showed a painting that directly refers to the Windu Bull myth, namely a painting in the form of a black bull on the left and a white elephant on the right, but their heads are fused with one eye. The meaning of the painting is that good and bad always exist in human life throughout their lives, and all of this exists to make humans surrender to Allah SWT (Kusdono, 2021).



Fig. 3: Painting of the Banteng-Windu by Kusdono Rastika
Source: Ilhamsyah, 2021

The use of this mythological figure is assumed to be a form of transformation of the meaning of myth because it is closely related to the embodiment of the figure of Richul Achmar in the story of his arrival to Prophet Sulaiman As. Richul Achmar. In the dialogue, it is explained that he is all kinds of diseases as well as the antidote. This figure will be a test for humanity that every disease and healing from that disease is solely the will of Allah SWT. (Hasyim and Hilman, 2021). The dualism of this figure is visualized through the presence of a bull on the body, and the denawa head with a trunk is a representation of an elephant in the Banteng Windu painting. The denotational meaning of bulls and elephants are animals that have the potential to be both nurturing and destructive because of their strength. This is connoted as an analogy for humans whose potential can be both nurturing and destructive.

These paradoxical concepts appear frequently in traditional Cirebon art and in Sufism in particular. The basic view of pre-modern society in Indonesia believes that reality consists of opposing but complementary dualities (Sumardjo, 2006: 25). The concept of paradox in Islam is often used to open the human mind to reflect on events and realities experienced (*tadabbur*). Through contemplation we can discover the existence of God, such as illness (difficulty) as a test and atonement for sins, wealth (ease) as a gift and a test for those who have it, and so on. In Islamic teachings regarding the attributes of God, it is explained that Allah has two attributes that are contradictory to each other, such as *al-Awwal* (The First) – *al-akhir* (The Last); *az-Zahir* (The Born) – *al-Bathin* (The Inner One), *al-Hadi* (The One Who Gives Guidance) – *al-Mudhill* (The Misleading One), and others. However, this dualism-paradox concept must emphasize the oneness of God, both as essence and existence, and do not emphasize only one of his characteristics. In essence, God is the unity of the binary opposition of these characteristics (Azra in Koesoemadinata: 2007: 135).

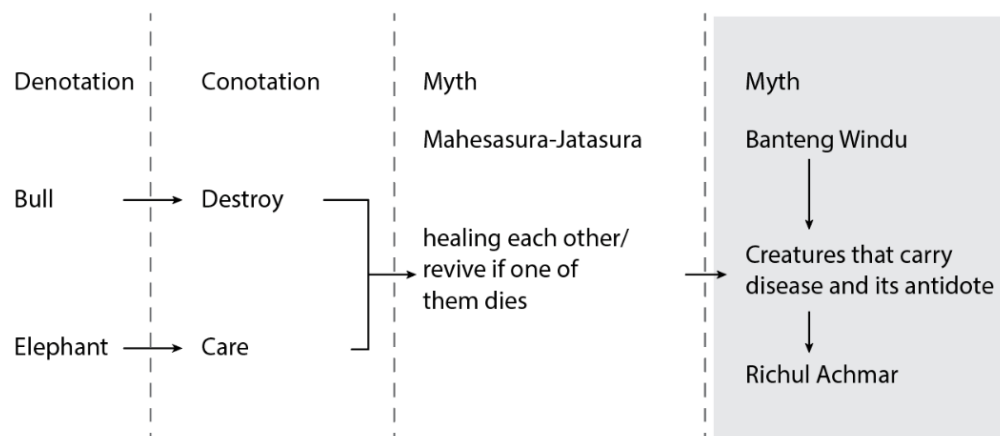


Fig. 4: Transformation process in the Srabad Banteng Windu painting
Source: Authors

Apart from the paradoxical concept of Cirebon culture, as part of pre-modern culture, it also adheres to a cosmocentric concept where humans are part of it (microcosm). The fusion of the microcosm and the macrocosm is an event where humans meet the Creator (*Menunggaling kawulo-Gusti*) (Sumardjo, 2006: 12). This *triloka* concept in the *Srabad* Banteng-Windu glass painting is realized in the form of the Wadatan ornament at the bottom representing the Nasut realm (human realm), the mystical figure of the Banteng-Windu represents the Lahut realm (the realm of spirits and angels), and the Megamendung ornament represents the Jabarut alah (the existence of God) (Koesoemadinata, 2007: 25). *Triloka* or *tribhuwana* is a conception of Hinduism consisting of *Sunyaluri*, *Madyapada*, and *Arcapada*, which are elements that undergo a consistent transformation process present in Cirebonan glass paintings. This three pattern model commonly appears on artifacts in Java, such as *Gunungan wayang*, *keris*, *stupas* in Java, *temple patterns*.

Indeed, this pattern contains unchanging synchronic elements, namely the vertical structured arrangement of the human world, the medium world, and ends with the top (transcendent). This pattern also contains diachronic elements, namely aspects of plurality in various different forms (Sumardjo, 2006: 21).

The concept of the *Triloka* which is present in every work of Cirebon traditional art gives an idea that if you want to understand its meaning, the work must be read as a whole (holistically). In this case the figure of the Bull-Windu must be seen as a mount (vehicle), namely a human vehicle (underworld/*wadasan*) to get to God (upper world/*megamendung*). It can be interpreted that the Windu Bull is a "vehicle" or gift (wealth, strength, supernatural powers, knowledge) that is used to get close to and know Allah SWT (*makrifat*) (Casta, 2022). Dr. Casta, a researcher and senior Cirebon cultural observer, emphasized that to understand the aesthetic-religious meaning of Cirebon traditional art, it must not be interrupted in just one part, like only understanding the forms of cultural acculturation that exist in Cirebon. The starting point must be from the awareness that the work created is a form of transcendental communication between creatures and their creators, the visual form that is present is only the use of idioms that existed and were popular in Cirebon society when the work was created (Casta, 2022). So the harmony of the multi-ethnic Cirebon community is only a side effect of the work created.

Table 1: Transformation of the Three Realms concept into a process of human journey in reaching the level of Makrifat.

Source: Authors

Srabad Banteng Windu	Image	Meaning
		<i>Alam Jabarut</i> Realm or the Divine Realm usually uses the Megamendung motif
		<i>Alam Lahut</i> or the saints realm, is represented by the object of the painting and also explains the purpose or meaning of the painting.
		<i>Alam Nasut</i> or human nature, usually uses the Wadasan motif, meaning that humans must have strong faith in life in this world.

Conclusions

This research shows the evidence of the transformation of pre-Islamic myths, signs and markers as a form of arbiter that appear in traditional artifacts which are used as tools to convey the message of faith (tawhid). Furthermore, through myths, signs and meanings undergo a transformation process for the purpose of preaching, according to the wishes and needs of the owners of social power, in this case the Guardians. As stated by Piliang, a myth anchors a meaning that is actually free and open into a definite meaning (anchorage). The axiology of the mythical sign in the *Srabad Banteng Windu* painting shows Derrida's "dynamic movement", namely how the signifier stands above the signified. The concept of transforming the meaning of pre-Islamic artifacts by giving them new meanings shows forms of reconstructions and deconstructions that have occurred in the past.

The interesting thing about the myth associated with *Srabad* painting arises from the shift from the *Kesanghyangan* era to the Islamic era. It promotes the belief in the existence of spirits (jinn, *puntianak*, *wewe gundul*, *blegedek ireng* or *genderuwo*) which is not in conflict with Islamic lessons in general (Muhaimin, 1996). The *Sulendraningrat* manuscript reveals

about the myth of the creation of the Javanese nation, especially the myth of the kinship relationship between Sunan Gunung Jati and the Prophet Adam.

Indeed, this analysis shows that myths can be used for "good" purposes. This is to say that, people use myths for their own 'good'. As shown, the Mahesasura-Jatasura myth has been used to make the Cirebon people's understanding of the Islamic lessons at that time easier to accept and understand, because on the one hand, the narrative is not much different from the traditional ones and on the other hand, the Cirebon people do not feel uprooted from their old traditions. It is therefore concluded that the process and purpose of transforming the meaning of the myth has been related to the cultural conditions of Cirebon society in the past.

This research thus makes a significant contribution to knowledge about myths in general and the myths associated with reverse glass paintings in Cirebon, Indonesia in particular. Its strength lies in the fact that hitherto, not much research has been done to reveal the meanings of them and their transformations as have manifested in the reverse glass paintings in Cirebon,, Indonesia. Hence, this provides a foundation for further investigations. However, its weakness is that it is a single case study and offers only limited insights into the multitude of myths associated with reverse glass paintings.

Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge that this Research was funded by Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP), grant number 1495/J5.2.3./BPI.06/10/2021, Balai Pembiayaan Pendidikan Tinggi (BPPT), Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, Republic of Indonesia.

Statement of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in carrying out this research.

Ethical Practice

This research followed accepted ethical practices. It examined publicly available historical and biographical information about the reverse paintings, and conducted interviews with living individuals. However, it did not involve the collection of confidential personal data, or any form of coercion or pressure on the participants.

Availability of Data

Data presented in this research is selected from a larger data set and they are available for scrutiny by any legitimate organization

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